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JOSEPH M. FERNANDO¹ AND SHANTHIAH RAJAGOPAL²

Politics, Security and Early Ideas of ‘Greater Malaysia’, 1945-1961

The Federation of Malaysia was formed in September 1963 after years of backroom discussions, planning and, finally, very intense and delicate negotiations between late 1961 and 1963. The origins of the federation, however, remain a contentious issue among scholars. The idea of a wider political entity, encompassing the Federation of Malaya, the British-controlled territories of Sarawak, North Borneo, Singapore, and Brunei, was formally announced by Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Prime Minister of the independent Federation of Malaya, at a speech given to the Foreign Correspondents Association of Southeast Asia in Singapore on 27 May 1961. In his speech, Tunku suggested the desirability of a “closer association” of the territories of Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo, Sarawak and Brunei to strengthen political and economic cooperation.³ The announcement was a major departure from the previous position of his Alliance Party government vis-à-vis the merger with

1. Dr. Joseph M. Fernando is an Associate Professor in the Department of History, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur.

2. Dr. Shanthiah Rajagopal is a graduate of the Department of History, University of Malaya, and an independent researcher.

3. Selkirk to Secretary of State, 27 May 1961, DO (Dominion Office) 169/25 (210), The National Archives, Kew, London. The Tunku noted in his speech: “Malaya today as a nation realises that she cannot stand alone and in isolation. Outside of international politics the national one must be broad based. Sooner or later she should have an understanding with Britain and the peoples of the territories of Singapore, North Borneo, Brunei and Sarawak. It is premature for me to say now how this closer understanding can be brought about but it is inevitable that we should look ahead to this objective and think of a plan whereby these territories can be brought closer together in a political and economic cooperation.” See also *Straits Times*, 28 May 1961.

Singapore and surprised many political observers—including the governors of the British-controlled Borneo states—because Malayan leaders had been turning down proposals by Singapore leaders for a direct merger with Malaya for some time.⁴

The formation of a broader federation between Malaya and Singapore, which was separated from Malaya in 1946, was contentious for several reasons. First, was the Malayan government's concern over the racial demographic balance. A merger between Malaya and Singapore and the inclusion of one million Chinese from the city-state would upset the political balance held by the Malay majority in Malaya.⁵ Second, an equally pressing issue was that of the perceived communist threat emanating from Singapore. There was a fear among Singapore leaders, particularly the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) that, after the split in the party in 1961 and the formation of the Barisan Sosialis (which opposed the merger) communists could come to power in Singapore. Barisan Sosialis was viewed as being dominated by the pro-Communists.⁶ Parties in Malaya such as the ruling Alliance Party and the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP) were also concerned about the communist influence from Singapore.⁷ In addition, Singapore leaders had approached Malayan leaders several times before 1961, seeking a direct merger as they felt the small city-state was not economically viable. The inclusion of the Borneo territories raised their own peculiar issues of integration such as questions of political and economic autonomy in these territories. These states were politically backward and there was some concern regarding the potential dominance of the Malayan state in the proposed wider federation.⁸ Nevertheless, Tunku's statement started a process of intense discussions and, later, constitutional negotiations that led to the formation of the Federation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963, comprising the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo (later known as Sabah). Brunei, which was involved in the final negotiations, opted out of the new federation at the last minute.

The formation of the federation of Malaysia has received much attention from scholars in recent years with the availability of declassified documents related to its formation. There are, however, considerable disagreements among scholars on the origins of the idea of the wider federation and the underlying reasons for the creation of such an odd entity. Sometimes the

4. Tan Tai Yong, *Creating "Greater Malaysia,"* Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009, pp. 33-48. See also Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story*, Singapore, Times Editions, 1998, pp. 363-364.

5. Tan Tai Yong, *Creating "Greater Malaysia,"* p. 30.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-18.

origin of the federation is attributed to Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's statement of 27 May 1961 urging a closer association of these territories. This is viewed as a starting point for a serious consideration of the federation idea as the formal talks began after this announcement. A closer examination of the primary documents on the formation of the federation, however, indicates that the origin of the idea of a wider federation has much deeper roots and Tunku's statement coincided with substantive high level discussions that were taking place in the Colonial Office and in Southeast Asia on the future of the British-controlled territories in the region at that time. In fact, British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia Malcolm MacDonald⁹ had conducted serious discussions on the subject of closer relations among the British-controlled territories in Borneo and Malaya as early as 1951. Existing studies have not discussed adequately the deeper origins of the idea of the federation, focusing mainly on the formal discussions in the post-1961 period. This article traces the formation of the federation to more varied and complex origins in the post-war period when a convergence of interests of the various parties provided a new impetus for the establishment of the broader federation. We show that the idea of a wider federation, although it dates back to the pre-World War II period, was taken up most seriously in the early 1950s, and again between 1960 and 1961 when new developments in the region required a reconsideration of the idea and prompted Tunku to formally propose it.

Ideas of closer association

Existing works provide an inadequate picture of the developments which led to the formation of the federation of Malaysia in 1963. Matthew Jones, for example, notes that the initiative for the formation of the Malaysian federation "came from different sources" but does not deal substantively with these sources and alludes to Tunku's primary role in the process. His study is focused largely on the intense process of negotiations which took place in the later stages leading to the formation of the federation.¹⁰ A.J. Stockwell's volume of British Documents on the formation of the federation of Malaysia is a selective compilation of related documents and does not reflect the earlier discussions adequately.¹¹ While his introductory section contains a useful

9. Malcolm MacDonald was the son of British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald who became a Labour Member of Parliament in 1929. He was Secretary of State for Colonies in 1935 and between 1938 and 1940. He served as British Governor-General for Southeast Asia in 1946-1948 and as Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia from 1948-1955. Between 1955 and 1960 he served as British High Commissioner in India. See A.J. Stockwell, *British policy and Malay politics, 1942-1948*, Kuala Lumpur, Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1979, p. 180.

10. Matthew Jones, "Creating Malaysia: Singapore Security, the Borneo Territories and the Contours of the British Policy, 1961-1963," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2000, pp. 85-109.

11. A.J. Stockwell, *Malaysia*, London, The Stationary Office (RSO), 2004.

discussion, it does not deal sufficiently with the pre-May 1961 discussions, rather focusing largely on the formal process of negotiations leading to the establishment of the federation in September 1963. Karl Hack has contended that the formation of Malaysia had “much to do with local developments, little to do with British plotting,” and concluded that while Britain had long pressed Malaya to associate with Singapore this had been ignored.¹² This is not entirely reflective of the chain of events that led to the formation of the federation. Tan Tai Yong’s book, *Creating “Greater Malaysia,”* provides a more substantive discussion of the formation of the federation but treats the pre-1961 period summarily.¹³ Tan merely observes that the new state was the outcome of a series of decisions made by British policy-makers and local political elites between 1960 and 1963.¹⁴ Other earlier works, based largely on secondary sources, provide interesting theories on the formation of Malaysia but do not shed much light on the early origins of the federation as these scholars did not have access to important official documents on the formation of the federation. These include works by Mohamed Nordin Sopiee and G.P. Means.¹⁵ Sopiee notes that while most accounts of the developments leading to the formation of Malaysia begin in May 1961, a case could be made for starting the analysis in 1960.¹⁶ In addition, while they hint at the earlier origins of the idea of the federation, the biographical accounts of the two main figures involved in the formation of Malaysia, i.e. the Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew¹⁷ and Ghazali Shafie¹⁸ –later the Foreign Minister of Malaysia– do not discuss in any depth the developments leading up to 1961. Invariably, the existing studies do not sufficiently discuss the earlier origins of the federation.

Ideas for a closer association between the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, North Borneo and Brunei, all of which were under the formal or informal control of the British since the 19th century, were put forward from a very early period. The earliest suggestion of the possibility of closer association between the Malayan states and the Borneo territories was made by Lord Brassey who suggested that these territories be merged ‘into one large colony’ in the House of Lords in 1887.¹⁹ Following this, senior British officials

12. Karl Hack, *Defence and Decolonisation in Southeast Asia: Britain, Malaya and Singapore, 1941-1968*, Richmond, Curzon, 2001, p. 275.

13. Tan Tai Yong, *Creating “Greater Malaysia,”* p. 2.

14. Ibid.

15. Mohamed Nordin Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation*, Kuala Lumpur, University of Malaya Press, 1976, pp. 91-124; G.P. Means, *Malaysian Politics*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1970, pp. 292-312.

16. Mohamed Nordin Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation*, p. 135.

17. Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story*, 1998.

18. Ghazalie Shafie, *Memoir on the Formation of Malaysia*, Bangi, Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1998, pp. 16-17. He claims he had ideas on the federation as early as 1948.

19. Mohamed Nordin Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation*, p. 127. See also

in the region and some Colonial Office officials remarked from time to time on the potential benefit of a closer association of these territories. These suggestions, however, remained mere ideas without any clear formula or plan of action and were not taken up seriously. British planning in London during the conflict over post-war Malaya did envision the possibility of Singapore being part of Malaya, but the 1946 Malayan Union scheme left Singapore out because of the importance of the city-state as a strategic British naval base. It is really in the immediate post-war Second World War period that serious thought and attention was given to the idea of a wider federation as the pace of decolonisation increased.

There was a general feeling among British administrators in London and in Southeast Asia in the post-war period that a closer political and economic union between the Federation of Malaya, Singapore and the Borneo territories would make the smaller territories in particular more viable entities. The Borneo territories of Sarawak, North Borneo and Brunei collectively had a population of about one million and British officials felt that they would not be able to survive on their own amid the larger states of Indonesia, the Philippines and China. In the immediate post-war period some important British policy documents make references intimating that Her Majesty's Government (HMG) and the Colonial Office favourably viewed the possibility of a merger between the Malayan federation and Singapore. In others, there were suggestions of the potential benefit of a closer association between the British territories in Borneo initially, and over the longer term some kind of cooperation between all these British-controlled territories. However, Colonial Office officials as well as senior administrators in these territories recognised that numerous obstacles remained in pursuing such a goal and that these objectives could only be brought about over a longer period and with the support of the peoples in these states.

HMG also made some public pronouncements about the possibility of closer association between the British territories in the post-war period. A minute of the Governor-General's conference held in Penang on 20 August 1946, for example, refers to closer association between the Malayan Union and Singapore amid concerns that they may be drifting apart, stating the need:

"to consider the situation in relation to the possibility of the Malayan Union and Singapore being more closely associated constitutionally at a not too distant date."²⁰

A brief prepared for the Secretary of State in October 1951, reinforced this early attitude:

Tan Tai Yong, *Creating 'Greater Malaysia,'* pp. 1-25.

20. A.J. Stockwell, *Malaya*, Part I, London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO), 1995, pp. 256-257.

“Public pronouncements by HMG have to date been confined to two statements of policy in the 1946-47 White Paper on the Malayan Constitution. The 1946 White Paper (CMD6724) stated that it was no part of HMG’s policy ‘to preclude or prejudice in any way the fusion of Singapore and the Malayan Union in a wider union at a later date should it be considered that such a course were desirable.’”

In the 1947 White Paper (CMD7171) it was stated that HMG still held this view and believed “that the question of Singapore joining the Federation should be considered on its merits and in the light of local opinion at an appropriate time.”²¹ Thus in the immediate period after the war there was a strong feeling among British officials that the tiny island of Singapore should eventually merge with Malaya. Nevertheless, very little progress was made on these statements of intent until the British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia Malcolm MacDonald initiated serious discussions with local political leaders, at times against the advice of the Colonial Office. Thus it is important to consider MacDonald’s role in the early origins of the federation.

MacDonald’s “Grand Design”

MacDonald was attracted to the idea of a wider entity encompassing all the British controlled territories in Southeast Asia to create a larger economic and political entity that could compete with its neighbours and facilitate eventual decolonisation and he therefore initiated several high-level discussions in the early 1950s. MacDonald’s particular interest in the broader federation can in part be credited to the general British post-war decolonisation policy of “unite and quit” which intended to create viable broader territorial units and nation-states.²² Further, as the most senior British officer in Southeast Asia, he was very familiar with local conditions and personally felt a broader federation would be beneficial to the otherwise smaller existing entities and strongly promoted the federation despite some reservations in the Colonial Office. He was also aware of the potential broader threat to the Southeast Asian states from the spread of communism.²³ In 1951, MacDonald held several discussions with the leading Malayan political leader Dato’ Onn Jaafar, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) chief and member of the Federal Legislative Council, on the idea of a ‘closer association’ between Malaya and Singapore on the one hand and the Borneo territories on the other. The primary records indicate that MacDonald discussed this idea of a closer association with Onn on 29 October 1951 and then wrote to the Colonial Office of the positive response he received and the need to pursue the issue. He noted that Onn showed a readiness to “consider ways and means of gradually

21. Brief for the Secretary of State’s Visit [to the Federation and Singapore], undated (c. October 1951), CO (Colonial Office) 1022/61 (230).

22. Karl Hack, *Defence and Decolonisation in Southeast Asia*, pp. 131-133.

23. Ibid., pp. 137-143. See also Tan Tai Yong, *Creating “Greater Malaysia,”* pp. 17-18.

bringing the Federation and Singapore closer together.”²⁴ It was agreed that a small group of officials from the federation and Singapore would have a preliminary meeting on the proposal at Bukit Serene (MacDonald’s residence in Johore Bahru) and then hold another meeting under the auspices of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to further discuss the idea. The Colonial Office, however, felt there was no public demand for closer political association in the federation or Singapore.²⁵ MacDonald and the Singapore Governor F. Gimson discussed the matter with some unofficial members of the Singapore legislature on 18 December 1951. A little later, MacDonald realised that Onn’s influence in Malayan politics began to wane after he formed the Independence of Malaya Party (IMP)²⁶ and informed the Colonial Office that there was a need to include “important shades of Malay opinion which Dato’ Onn and his IMP colleagues no longer fully represent.”²⁷ This was a reference to the UMNO under the leadership of Tunku Abdul Rahman who succeeded Onn. MacDonald also noted that the Borneo territories favoured a closer association if it also involved closer association with Singapore.

The Colonial Office, however, had reservations about MacDonald’s idea of closer political association and felt it was a bit premature.²⁸ Gimson discussed this matter with the federation’s High Commissioner, Sir Gerald Templer, in February 1952, and noted that closer association should be achieved at “the earliest possible date.”²⁹ A further meeting on the idea was held on 18 May 1953 and the consensus reached was that local opinion was less in favour of the idea. Templer observed that while a year earlier he had felt it was possible to make some progress towards the goal of a closer association, “during the last year feeling in both territories had become more opposed to the idea.”³⁰ Singapore Governor Sir J. Nicoll agreed with Templer’s views, noting that constitutional advance “would make it even more difficult.”³¹ The meeting nevertheless concluded that their continued objective “should still be the closest political association between Singapore and the Federation that we

24. MacDonald to Colonial Office, 29 Oct. 1951, CO 1022/61 (232).

25. Brief for Secretary of State’s Visit [to Federation and Singapore], undated (c. October 1951), CO 1022/61 (230).

26. Dato’ Onn Jaafar had left the UMNO and formed the Independence of Malaya (IMP) party in September 1951 after the UMNO refused to open its membership to non-Malays. Interestingly, it was Tunku Abdul Rahman who replaced Onn as the UMNO president in 1951, and who was later to play a prominent role in the formation of the federation of Malaysia.

27. MacDonald to Colonial Office, 29 Jan. 1952, CO 1022/61 (220).

28. Minute by J.D. Higham, 6 Feb. 1952, CO 1022/61.

29. Gimson to MacDonald, 29 Feb. 1952, CO 1022/61.

30. Minute of meeting to discuss closer association between Federation and Singapore held on 18 May 1953, CO 1022/61 (128).

31. *Ibid.*

can get local opinion to accept.”³² It was felt that the setting up of a Joint Federation/Singapore Co-ordination Committee under the chairmanship of MacDonald would assist in reaching this objective. In a briefing to the Cabinet in April 1954, the Secretary of State noted that constitutional changes in Singapore “need not prove an obstacle to the objective of closer association between the Federation and Singapore.”³³

MacDonald continued to pursue his idea despite reservations expressed by Templer and Nicoll. He began to market the idea further in the Borneo states. Preliminary discussions were held in 1954 between MacDonald and the governors of Sabah and Sarawak. On 28 October 1954 a high-level discussion was held in Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, between MacDonald, the Governor of Sarawak (Sir Anthony Abell), the Governor of North Borneo (R.E. Turnbull), Sir John Martin (Assistant Undersecretary of State in the Colonial Office) and R.W. Jakeman (Assistant Commissioner-General for Colonial Affairs). At this meeting MacDonald emphasised the importance of a closer association, noting that “the ultimate aim, if it proved practicable and if it met with the approval of the people concerned was a federation of all five Malaya/Borneo Territories.”³⁴ As a first step, he suggested, there should be a closer association of the three Borneo territories, which would then be followed by an association between this group and the Malayan territories.³⁵ This was the first real push, initiated by MacDonald, for a wider federation of all five territories. The governors of Sarawak and North Borneo, however, were somewhat hesitant and noted that there would be some reluctance on the part of the Borneo states. Those present at the meeting nevertheless agreed “the ultimate aim was some sort of Confederation between all five Territories.”³⁶ It was also agreed that the Borneo territories should be brought together first before attempting a “constitutional partnership” with Malaya.³⁷ The plan for a wider confederation thus took a firmer shape at this meeting.

MacDonald continued to pursue this idea of a wider federation during his remaining time in office in Southeast Asia. For example, the Joint Co-ordination Committee formed in 1954 between the Federation of Malaya and Singapore to discuss bilateral matters was also asked to discuss the issue of closer association between the Federation, Singapore and the Borneo Territories. Leaving nothing to chance, when it appeared that he may be posted

32. Minute of meeting to discuss closer association between Federation and Singapore held on 18 May 1953, CO 1022/61 (130).

33. Paper on Constitutional Changes in Singapore, CO 1030/78 (49), April 1954.

34. Note of Meeting in Kuching to discuss closer association between Borneo Territories, 28 Oct. 1954, CO 1030/164 (178).

35. *Ibid.*

36. Note of Meeting in Kuching to discuss closer association between Borneo Territories, 28 Oct. 1954, CO 1030/164 (181).

37. MacDonald to John Martin, 7 Jan. 1955, CO 1030/164 (169).

elsewhere after the first federal elections in Malaya in July 1955, MacDonald began to more earnestly push his idea with the Secretary of State for Colonies, arguing the benefits of such a federation. On 2 April 1955, shortly before the first federal elections in the Federation, MacDonald wrote to the Secretary of State, Alan Lennox-Boyd, of the possibility of closer association between the Federation and Singapore. MacDonald wrote:

"But I hope that, whatever the (July 1955) Election results, the reformed Committee [Joint Co-ordination Committee] will confirm the impression given at the Committee's last meeting that leaders in all parties in both countries are ready to make the Committee the instrument for planning closer political association. I think the prospects of this are quite good, and that if the Committee is prudently and yet boldly guided, all the difficulties can be overcome and a satisfactory accord reached."³⁸

MacDonald reiterated that Britain's ultimate objective

"... is a Confederation between the five present territories of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, North Borneo and Brunei," explicitly stating the long-term intentions of the British government. It was agreed that this would be done in two stages: first, the combination of the Federation of Malaya and Singapore; and then the three Borneo Territories as separate entities; and, second, these two groups were to be brought together under one appropriate constitutional government."³⁹

He admitted that he had been "planting the idea" in the minds of political leaders in the Federation and Singapore for the last few years, adding:

"Because of the political 'backwardness' of the Borneo Territories, we have not initiated similar private discussion on the subject there, and the Bornean leaders are perhaps less aware than those in Malaya of our grand design. Possibly we should begin to propagate the idea in Sarawak, North Borneo and Brunei."⁴⁰

This letter by MacDonald in April 1955 is the first mention of what later became known as the "Grand Design," in all Colonial Office references to the formation of a wider federation among the British controlled territories. (Later on, it was replaced by the term 'Greater Malaysia'.) Thus between 1951 and 1955 it was MacDonald who personally pursued high-level discussions on the idea of a wider federation of British-controlled territories in Southeast Asia, even though he faced considerable resistance from the Colonial Office on the timing for the discussion of the scheme. These discussions were quite advanced at the time. His persistence in pushing the idea, it can be argued, led to a basic acceptance among the senior officials both in the Colonial Office and the British territories in Southeast Asia of the idea of a "Grand Design"

38. MacDonald to Secretary of State, 2 April 1955, CO 1030/163 (20).

39. *Ibid.*

40. MacDonald to Secretary of State, 2 April 1955, CO 1030/163 (25).

incorporating all these territories in some form of constitutional relationship and this was more evident when the Colonial Office resurrected the idea subsequently, well before Tunku made his statement in May 1961.

The Secretary of State Alan Lennox-Boyd's response was not very enthusiastic. He felt that it would not be possible for the Committee to do much work until after the first federal elections in the Federation of Malaya scheduled to be held in July 1955.⁴¹ The lukewarm attitude of the Colonial Office towards MacDonald's efforts was influenced in part by the fact that MacDonald's tenure as Commissioner-General was up for reconsideration around this time and it seemed likely that he would be replaced and given another posting. Nevertheless a Joint Coordinating Committee (JCC) of officials from Malaya and Singapore in a meeting held on 13 June 1955 made some interesting conclusions on the issue of closer association. The JCC felt that closer association between the two territories was "desirable" but recognised that it would be difficult to overcome "some practical difficulties and the matter should not be rushed."⁴² The JCC agreed that "a complete unitary state might be the ultimate aim but it is not practicable in the foreseeable future" and that some form of federation between the two territories would be easier to attain.⁴³ MacDonald's idea of a federation clearly had gained considerable support among the elites in Malaya and Singapore. MacDonald's term of office as Commissioner-General, however, ended in July 1955 and in the wake of the Alliance victory in the July elections the idea of a closer association lost some momentum temporarily although it was to be revived by his successors. His immediate successor, R. H. Scott, while recognising the importance of a merger with Singapore did not push for the idea as enthusiastically. The initiative to pursue the idea of a wider federation was taken up by the Singapore leaders who had been involved in the discussions held by MacDonald.

Internal discussions at the Colonial Office

Following MacDonald's departure the Chief Minister of Singapore David Marshall and other leaders from the colony such as Lim Yew Hock and Lee Kuan Yew, some of whom had been involved in the discussions with

41. Lennox-Boyd to MacDonald, 2 June 1955, CO 1030/163 (10). MacKintosh of the Colonial Office noted: "... Mr. MacDonald is again being too sanguine in his estimate of the prospects of the J.C.C."

42. Note on Meeting of Joint Co-ordination Committee, 13 June 1955, CO 1030/161 (146).

43. Ibid. The JCC comprised D.C. Watherston (Chief Secretary), J.P. Hogan (Attorney-General), Dato Onn Jaafar (Member for Home Affairs), R.B. Carey (Works), H.S. Lee (Transport), V.M.N. Menon (Posts and Telecommunications), Panglima Bukit Gantang (*Mentri Besar*, Perak), Tunku Abdul Rahman and Yong Shook Lin (Malayan representatives); W.A.C. Goode (Colonial Secretary), E.J. Davies (Attorney-General), Thio Chan Bee, Sir Ewen Ferguson, C.C. Tan, Lim Yew Hock, N.A. Mallal and Ahmad bin Mohamed Ibrahim (Singapore representatives).

MacDonald, began to push for the idea of a merger between Singapore and the federation as Malayan independence neared.⁴⁴ They felt that a separate Singapore island nation would not be sustainable economically. Lee Kuan Yew, for instance, argued that "the logic of geography and the force of historical, ethnic and economic forces all point to the inevitability of merger."⁴⁵ On 29 February 1956, the Singapore Chief Minister David Marshall asked for an urgent meeting with the Federation government to discuss "the question of future relations between the two territories." But Malaya's Chief Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, who had just returned after successful Independence talks in London, did not wish to hold a meeting "on such an important subject" on short notice, and sought additional information. Marshall then requested that the federation government agree to formal talks on closer relations. The Tunku, however, was not keen to discuss the subject matter as he felt that it could jeopardise the federation's claim to Independence.⁴⁶ Marshall, Lim Yew Hock and Lee Kuan Yew nevertheless met Tunku informally on 3 March 1956, requesting that the terms of the Constitutional Commission for the Federation be broadened "to permit consideration of the problem of closer political association with Singapore."⁴⁷ Tunku rejected their demands stating that any attempt to establish a closer political relationship between the two countries "must be deferred until after the constitutional commission had reported."⁴⁸ Marshall told the Singapore Legislative Assembly on 7 March 1956 that he and Tunku had agreed to commence official discussions of a merger after the new federation constitution had been finalised.⁴⁹ Commissioner-General R. H. Scott criticised Marshall's view that the issue at stake was a choice between "Singapore's independence and chaos."⁵⁰ Rather, he felt, it was a choice between Singapore's independence and some form of association with Malaya. Scott was against independence for Singapore in the near future:

"My own view is that we should decide definitely against independence and in favour of association with Malaya as the goal; that meanwhile we should go on governing Singapore as long as we can."⁵¹

On 14 June 1956, Singapore's new Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock travelled to Kuala Lumpur for two days of informal exploratory talks on a merger

44. Tan Tai Yong, *Creating 'Greater Malaysia,'* pp. 34-41.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

46. Sir R. Black to Secretary of State for Colonies, CO 1030/161 (82), 1 March 1956.

47. High Commissioner Sir Donald MacGillivray to Secretary of State for Colonies, CO 1030/161, 9 March 1956.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Statement by Chief Minister David Marshall, CO 1030/161, 7 March 1956.

50. R.H. Scott to British Prime Minister, 8 March 1956, CO 1030/161 (78).

51. *Ibid.*

between the Federation and Singapore.⁵²

In spite of the lack of progress with regard to the idea of a broader federation after MacDonald's departure, the British government was nevertheless committed to the idea over the longer term because of the perceived lack of economic viability of the smaller territories as independent entities and the potential for these territories to fall to communist influence in the context of the on-going Cold War in Southeast Asia. Britain's position is clear from an explanatory note written by a senior Colonial Office official, J.B. Johnston, dated 19 November 1956, in response to queries from Washington on the matter:

All the logic of history, geography and economics points to union with the Federation as Singapore's obvious political destiny. We do not believe Singapore could sustain a truly independent existence – it is a city rather than a country. If it were left on its own, it would be extremely vulnerable to the domination of some outside power, and if that power were not ourselves or the Federation, it would be most likely to be Communist China. We would therefore welcome a reunion of Singapore and the Federation, but this is not something we can effect ourselves. If it is successful it must spring from mutual interest and agreement of the two parties to the deal. At the moment one party –Singapore– is very keen on merger, chiefly as the door to complete political independence. The other party –or at least the Government at present in power– are strongly opposed to the merger on both racial and political grounds.⁵³

It is clear thus that after MacDonald had left Malaya the idea of a wider federation was pursued by Singapore's leaders and British officials. While 'substantive' discussions on the wider federation had been held in the 1950s⁵⁴, the matter took on a greater degree of importance and urgency in 1960. As Malaya achieved Independence in 1957, the British government began to give more thought to the future of the smaller British-controlled territories in Southeast Asia –Singapore, Sarawak, Sabah and Brunei– and there was renewed interest in the idea of a wider federation which again becomes the focus of intense discussions. This idea, often referred to as the "Grand Design",⁵⁵ was in keeping with British policies elsewhere in combining, where possible, smaller territories into bigger units as part of the decolonisation process.

In early 1960, a renewed enthusiasm on the idea of closer association is evident on the heel of some important developments and discussions in late 1959⁵⁶. One of the main sources for this change in attitude appears to be a

52. Reuters report, 14 June 1956, CO 1030/162 (27).

53. J.B. Johnston to F.S. Tomlinson, 19 Nov. 1956, CO 1030/162 (9).

54. See, for example, Bourdillon to Melville, 5 Dec 1959 and enclosed draft of assembly speech by Goh Keng Swee, CO 1030/972 (1), and Bourdillon to Melville, 24 Dec. 1959, CO 1030/971 (6).

55. The term has been used for many years to describe various ideas which from time to time have been put forward for a closer association between British Borneo Territories, Sarawak, North Borneo and Brunei, Singapore and the Federation of Malaya. See DO 169/27 (210), c. July 1961.

56. Bourdillon to Melville, 24 Dec. 1959, CO 1030/972 (6). Tory had a discussion with Lee Kuan Yew on 24 December 1959 during which he pointed out to Lee the obstacles he would

letter and a report written in January 1960 by Sir Geoffrey Tory, the British High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur, to the Colonial Office on the issue of merger between the federation and Singapore and economic relations between both territories following Singapore's proposal for a common market.⁵⁷ Tory had told Lee of the Tunku's opposition to merger and statements by Lee that merger was a 'foreseeable possibility', were politically embarrassing and an encouragement to his opponents.⁵⁸

Following Tory's letters and report on relations between the federation and Singapore, the Colonial Office felt that a general discussion should be held on HMG's policy towards future relations between the federation and Singapore.⁵⁹ The Colonial Office suggested that the Commonwealth Prime Minister's conference in June 1960 might serve as an opportunity to attempt to win the Tunku's confidence regarding Singapore.⁶⁰ Considerable attention is given in the Colonial Office's correspondence to finding a gentle way of approaching the Tunku during the Prime Minister's Conference in order to raise the question of future relations between Malaya and Singapore.⁶¹ Several attempts were made in 1960 to win over the Tunku's reluctance to consider a possible merger with Singapore.⁶² Tory, for example, cautioned the Commonwealth Relations Office in April 1960:

"My fear is that if we were to urge the Tunku in direction of closer economic cooperation without being able to demonstrate economic gain for federation, he might conclude that we were subordinating federation interests to those of Singapore, or that we were pushing the Federation towards merger."⁶³

Selkirk urged that the approach to Tunku should have a "broad political basis," and not mainly underscore economic points; it should also emphasise the importance of positive bilateral relations with the Internal Security Council

face in seeking a more forthcoming attitude from the federation towards Singapore's problems and its battle with the communists. Tory felt that Tunku and Razak's attitude towards closer economic understanding with Singapore was governed by purely political considerations: 'They regarded this simply as a first step towards political merger.'

57. Martin to Hunt, 25 March 1960, CO 1030/972 (15). See also the report by Tory, CO 1030/972 (E/10), dated 7 Jan. 1960, on talks with Lee Kuan Yew during his visit to Singapore from 20-22 Dec 1959.

58. Report by Tory, CO 1030/972 (E/10), dated 7 Jan. 1960, on talks with Lee Kuan Yew during his visit to Singapore from 20-22 Dec 1959.

59. Martin to Hunt, 25 March 1960, CO 1030/972 (15).

60. See Minute by W.I.J. Wallace, 20 Jan. 1960, CO 1030/972. See also the report by Tory, CO 1030/972 (E/10), dated 7 Jan. 1960, on talks with Lee Kuan Yew during his visit to Singapore from 20-22 Dec. 1959, CO 1030/972 (10) and Tory to Hunt, and CO 1030/972 (8), 6 January 1960.

61. *Ibid.*

62. See, for example, Tory to Commonwealth Relations Office, 6 April 1960, CO 1030/972 (23). See also minute by Wallace, 17 Nov. 1960, CO 1030/972.

63. Tory to Commonwealth Relations Office, 8 April 1960, CO 1030/972 (25).

(ISC) and its work. The ISC discussed security matters in the federation and Singapore and included several Malayan ministers.⁶⁴

The records indicate Tunku's deputy, Abdul Razak, had become more inclined to support the idea of merger and viewed it as a practicable measure in view of the rise of leftist parties in Singapore as the colony edged towards independence.⁶⁵ Discussions between Duncan Sandys, the Minister of State for Commonwealth Affairs, and Tunku in November 1960 made some headway after some careful pre-planning on the part of the Colonial Office in raising the various issues, including the merger with Singapore.⁶⁶ British officials were able to convince Razak of the need to pursue the idea of a broader federation. Razak appears to have then persuaded the Tunku of the urgency of the matter.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, Lee Kuan Yew, encouraged by the British, proposed a 'wider political association' including the Borneo territories which he felt would be more acceptable to Tunku than a straight merger between the federation and Singapore.⁶⁸ He argued that if a merger with Malaya did not take place, it was likely that Singapore, after achieving independence, would become "a Chinese communist base right in the heart of Southeast Asia with incalculable consequences to all territories of the whole region."⁶⁹ In his paper, Lee argued that a larger federation of Malaya, Singapore and the Borneo territories would be the most satisfactory solution for the peoples of the three territories, with the added advantage that the British would agree with it.⁷⁰ Lee felt that it was imperative that agreement on constitutional arrangements should be reached soon. Singapore was due to re-open constitutional talks with Britain in early 1963, with independence as a possible next step. He felt that if no constitutional advance was achieved, it was likely that the PAP would be replaced by a pro-Malayan Communist Party and a pro-China Singapore government.

64. Selkirk to Secretary of State, 13 April 1960, CO 1030/972 (27).

65. Selkirk to Macleod, 30 Jan. 1961, CO 1030/978 (119). See also Selkirk to Colonial Office, 30 Jan. 1961, CO 1030/972 (122).

66. See Brief for Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations Duncan Sandys for visit of Tunku Abdul Rahman, 14 Nov. 1960, CO 1030/972 (98); and meeting with Duncan Sandys scheduled 21 Nov. 1960, CO 1030/972 (57). See also Bourdillon to Eugene, 19 Jan. 1961, CO 1030/972 (121). Bourdillon: "I have now heard from Lord Selkirk that he had not had much opportunity to discuss with Mr. Sandys the talks with the Tengku but that Mr. Sandys had told him that he had put the problem of Singapore/Federation relations very frankly to the Tengku. There had been no unfavourable reaction, but it was not possible to say if the Tengku had accepted the propositions which were put to him."

67. Tan Tai Yong, *Creating "Greater Malaysia,"* pp. 55-56.

68. Selkirk to Macleod, 30 Jan. 1961, CO 1030/978 (119).'

69. Paper on the future of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore and the Borneo territories by Lee Kuan Yew, CO 1030/972 (E203), 9 May 1961.

70. Paper on the future of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore and the Borneo territories by Lee Kuan Yew, CO 1030/972 (E203), 9 May 1961. See also Selkirk to Macleod, 10 May 1961, CO 1030/972 (30).

Meanwhile, the first substantive renewed discussion of the idea of the broader federation was a meeting of heads of the Borneo Territories chaired by the Deputy Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia, Sir Dennis Allen, on 23 January 1960 at Phoenix Park in Singapore.⁷¹ Here MacDonald's "Grand Design" and the possibility of Brunei joining the federation of Malaya separately was discussed. On the issue of closer association, Allen asked the meeting to consider the chances of a wider federation as conceptualised by MacDonald in the "Grand Design"; the existing programmes for closer association and whether any problem would arise for North Borneo and Sarawak if Brunei joined the Federation of Malaya. Mixed reactions emerged from the discussion in the meeting. Firstly, the point was made that the indigenous races of the Borneo territories "would not welcome any transfer of rule from British colonial servants (whom they regarded as their protectors) to Malays or Chinese (whom they traditionally feared)".⁷² At the same time, it was felt, a federation of the five territories would have advantages because Brunei's tendency was to lean towards Malaya and away from her two neighbours; thus, the absorption of Singapore could more easily be achieved in this manner than through a bilateral merger.⁷³ The "Grand Design", it was argued, should not be discounted and could be seen as a potential long-term solution or a short-term tactical move used to offset any disadvantage resulting from Brunei's joining the federation.

Writing to the Colonial Office on 5 February 1960, Allen noted that he was not able to take the discussion of closer association further at the Singapore meeting because of the absence of the representative from North Borneo. There was, however general agreement that it would be desirable to articulate the position to be adopted by Her Majesty's Government towards any move by the Sultan of Brunei in the direction of closer association in Malaya, keeping in mind the impact of this position on closer association between Sarawak and North Borneo as well as the wider confederation which would include Singapore.⁷⁴ Following this, an important meeting was held at the Colonial Office chaired by Sir John Martin on 29 March 1960 where the idea of closer association between the Borneo territories and the Federation of Malaya and

71. Record of meeting of Borneo Territories in Singapore chaired by Sir Denis Allen, the Deputy Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia, 23 Jan. 1960, CO 1030/977 (1). This meeting was attended by F.D. Jakeway (Governor of Sarawak), D.C. White (Governor of Brunei) and several defence officials (Lt. Gen. Sir W. Oliver (Canberra), Sir L. Fry (Jakarta), J.A. Pilcher (Manila), Col. Cameron (General HQ FARELF), Commander Lee-White (Far East Station) and E.H. Peck). See CO 1030/977 (2) Note on the Future of Borneo Territories (undated, c. Jan-Feb. 1960).

72. Record of meeting of Borneo Territories in Singapore chaired by Sir Denis Allen, 23 Jan. 1960, CO 1030/977 (1).

73. *Ibid.*

74. Allen to Melville, 5 Feb. 1960, CO 1030/977 (2).

Singapore were discussed at length. This meeting, attended by Sir William Goode (Governor Designate, North Borneo), W.I.J. Wallace (Colonial Office), W.J. Smith (Commonwealth Relations Office) and N. Nield (Colonial Office),⁷⁵ considered four potential scenarios in relation to the closer association of the British territories and Malaya: first, the possibility of the closer association of North Borneo, Sarawak and Brunei; second, the closer association of North Borneo and Sarawak, leaving Brunei apart; third, a closer alignment between Brunei and the Federation of Malaya; and, fourth, the possibility of a wider Federation including Singapore, the Federation of Malaya and the three Borneo territories.⁷⁶ There was general agreement during the meeting that the territories could move towards the idea of a closer association “in varying stages.” Martin felt that in the long term, the fourth option, the wider federation of the Borneo territories with the Federation of Malaya and Singapore “might well offer the best prospect for the three Borneo territories.”⁷⁷ There was also a consensus, however, that it would be undesirable to move too quickly in the encouragement of a wider Federation. For the present the best course was to encourage the closer association of North Borneo and Sarawak and at the same time “neither encourage nor discourage a closer alignment between Brunei and the Federation of Malaya.”⁷⁸

Other developments in the region then hastened the discussions and a new sense of urgency became evident, particularly following the deterioration in relations between the Dutch and the Indonesians over Dutch New Guinea. On 5 May 1960, Lord Selkirk wrote to Selwyn Lloyd of the Foreign Office on the Dutch-Indonesia relations over New Guinea and noted the potential impact of this conflict on the British territories in Southeast Asia.⁷⁹ The seriousness of the conflict appears to have motivated the British authorities to hold more intense discussions on the future of the British territories in Southeast Asia, including the closer association. This was well before the Tunku informed Lord Perth of own proposal for a wider federation in June 1960.

Britain’s position on the idea of closer association of Malaya and the British-controlled territories in Southeast Asia is further reiterated in a letter by a senior official of the Colonial Office, John Martin, to Dennis Allen on 18 May 1960 confirming support for the original ‘Grand Design’ envisaged by

75. Note of meeting at Colonial Office chaired by Sir John Martin, 29 March, 1960, CO 1030/977 (3).

76. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.* Martin noted at the same time that this idea could face numerous difficulties. First, in respect of the relationship between the federation and Singapore and, second, the likely reactions from Indonesia and the Philippines.

78. *Ibid.* A background paper attached to this note on the meeting of 29 March 1960, states that the idea of a closer association of the Borneo territories had been discussed for some time from 1957 to 1959.

79. Selkirk to Selwyn, 5 May 1960, CO 1030/977 (4).

MacDonald: "HMG was in favour of a close association between the British territories in Borneo and Malaya and Singapore in the long term in line with the 'Grand Design'."⁸⁰ Britain felt that the Borneo territories could not survive on their own or in a collective entity of the Borneo states. The fear was that the stronger neighbours, Indonesia, the Philippines and China, could in the longer term pose a serious threat to the political survival of these territories. A brief prepared for the Minister of State Lord Perth's meeting with Tunku on 10 June 1960 was hopeful that the British government could take advantage of the Tunku's presence at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in London that month to convince him of the mutual benefit of the closer association.⁸¹

Tunku's idea of closer association

Interestingly, Tunku had his own 'Grand Design' ideas for closer association of the Malayan Federation with the Borneo territories. Tunku preferred to form a broader federation involving Sarawak and Brunei with the Federation of Malaya and had related this to Lord Perth on 10 June 1960 and Lord Home a little earlier.⁸² Tunku expressed some concern over Indonesian intentions towards the Borneo states in his discussions. The Tunku had several potential combinations in mind: one, a federation between Malaya, Sarawak and Brunei with Britain retaining control over North Borneo; and a second which included Malaya, all the Borneo territories and Singapore. In his note on the discussion, Lord Perth remarked he felt the Tunku was keen to add "something more" to the Malayan Federation:

After the usual courtesies the Tunku plunged into the purpose of his visit, namely the possibility of federation of Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo, Sarawak and Brunei. He wanted the British government to know that he would be prepared to face such a happening although it would give him a great number of headaches. I replied that this was something which we hadn't really given a great deal of thought to ... I pointed out that politically North Borneo and Sarawak were backward and how it was clearly important that they should learn the art of running themselves before they were asked to face decisions on their ultimate future ... The Tunku then tried a slightly new line and suggested Brunei and Sarawak joining the Federation while the British Government remained in North Borneo to develop it economically and to use it as a military base.⁸³

80. Martin to Allen, 18 May 1960, CO 1030/977 (5).

81. Brief for the Minister of State for talk with Tunku Abdul Rahman, 9 June 1960, CO 1030/977 (6A).

82. Memorandum by Far Eastern Department, Colonial Office, 22 June 1961. See also note by Lord Perth, 10 June 1960, CO 1030/977 (E6B). The Tunku had also related his idea of a federation with the Borneo territories to Lord Home on 3 June 1960, noting that "we must be ready for an Indonesian move against these territories." See Brief for Minister of State for Talk with Tunku, 9 June 1960, CO 1030/977 (6A).

83. Note by Lord Perth, 10 June 1960, CO 1030/977 (E6B).

The Colonial Office, however, felt Tunku's proposal was unrealistic.⁸⁴ The Secretary of State noted that it would be odd to think of retaining North Borneo as a Crown Colony after Sarawak had either become self-governing on its own or had merged with the Federation and advised that the Tunku should not be encouraged to pursue this line:

"Brunei, the wealthiest and most Malay of the three territories, is the plum from the Tunku's point of view and once he had got it his interest in the rest might decline."⁸⁵

The British government was not in favour of Tunku's idea and felt he should be discouraged from pursuing it. There were differences over the composition of the federation at that stage, with Tunku keen on a smaller federation involving Sarawak and Brunei as well as the Malayan Federation, while the British government preferred a broader federation involving all the Borneo states, Singapore and the Federation of Malaya.

Clearly there was considerable discussion at the highest levels of the British administration of the possibility of closer association between the Federation of Malaya and the British-controlled territories of Singapore, North Borneo, Sarawak and Brunei prior to Tunku's intimation to Lord Perth on 10 June 1960. While these discussions were peaking, Tunku's disclosure to Lord Perth about the possibility of a federation of Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo, Sarawak and Brunei provided a window of opportunity for the Colonial Office to actively pursue the idea with Malayan leaders.⁸⁶

A convergence of interests?

It is from this stage that the idea of a wider federation takes on a life of its own. The Colonial Office came out with a policy paper on the future of the Borneo territories and Singapore, after several discussions and following Tunku's proposal, put to Lord Perth on 10 June 1960 the idea of a "Greater Malaysia" federation. A Colonial Policy Committee paper [CPC(60)(17)] for the British Cabinet was prepared by the Secretary of State in early July 1960 and was discussed on 27 July of the same year; it clearly reflects the convergence of interests of the various parties.⁸⁷ This policy paper became the basis for HMG's policy on the subject of closer association of the British territories in Southeast Asia.⁸⁸ The CPC paper noted that, during a visit to

84. Draft Cabinet Paper for Colonial Policy Committee (Prepared by Sir John Martin), April 1961, DO 169/25 (311).

85. *Ibid.*

86. See Note by Lord Perth, 10 June 1960, CO 1030/977 (35, Annex 2).

87. See Draft Cabinet paper, C.P.C (61), 15 February 1961, CO 1030/978 (121) and Draft Cabinet paper, C.P.C (60), 20 Jan. 1961, CO 1030/978 (109).

88. Secretary of State's paper for the Cabinet titled, Colonial Policy Committee – CPC (60), 'Possibility of an association of the British Borneo territories with the Federation of Malaya and Singapore', July 1960, CO 1030/977 (35).

London (June 1960) for the Prime Ministers' Conference, Tunku Abdul Rahman 'raised informally the possibility of a federation of Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo, Sarawak and Brunei.'⁸⁹ The paper observed that 10 years earlier Malcolm MacDonald had put forward the idea that the most favourable plan for Britain's Southeast Asian territories might be some sort of association between the Federation of Malaya, Singapore and the Borneo territories. This idea of closer association had again been given some consideration in recent years but "has not got far because local feeling about it in North Borneo and Sarawak, while mildly favourable, has not developed much enthusiasm and because the Sultan of Brunei is not interested, his eyes being turned towards the Federation of Malaya."⁹⁰ The memorandum reiterated that Britain had always had in mind that Singapore and the Federation of Malaya would one day merge and "have publicly blessed this idea on more than one occasion."⁹¹

In relation to the Borneo territories, North Borneo and Sarawak, it was felt that the states should ultimately achieve self-government although it was recognised that, at the present time, the inhabitants "have no wish other than that the territories should remain with us as Crown Colonies."⁹² The Borneo territories were viewed as being in a very vulnerable position because of their geographical position and racial make-up. The paper noted that China, Indonesia and the Philippines all have, or could easily work up, interests of one kind or another:

"We certainly would not wish to move out so that anyone else might step in. Even an association of North Borneo and Sarawak would not be a very strong state."⁹³

The ultimate solution, the paper argued, would be "an association of the Federation of Malaya, Sarawak, North Borneo and Brunei with, if possible, Singapore in also." Thus it concluded that the Tunku's idea "is not unattractive to us."⁹⁴ The Secretary of State felt that the Tunku and Lee Kuan Yew should be consulted, in addition to Australia and New Zealand,

"Subject to the result of these consultations we should then, as may be seen appropriate, sound out confidentially Tunku Abdul Rahman and Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, probably in that order, and possibly also the Sultan of Brunei and, subject to the views of the Governors, selected local notables in Sarawak and North Borneo."⁹⁵

89. *Ibid.*

90. *Ibid.*

91. *Ibid.*

92. *Ibid.*

93. *Ibid.*

94. Secretary of State's paper for the Cabinet titled, "Possibility of an association of the British Borneo territories with the Federation of Malaya and Singapore," July 1960, CO 1030/977 (35).

95. Draft Cabinet Paper for Colonial Policy Committee (Prepared by Sir John Martin), April 1961, DO 169/25 (314).

This meeting concluded that the Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia, Lord Selkirk, who was present, should discuss the matter with officials in Borneo. This discussion eventually took place in Kuching on 20 October 1960. As a result of the discussion and a further meeting at Eden Hall, Selkirk made several recommendations to the Secretary of State. These recommendations, which were supported by those present at the meeting, wanted HMG to accept “as the ultimate aim of their policy the development of a political association between Malaya, Singapore and the three Borneo territories.”⁹⁶ But the approach to achieving this goal was to be gradual and “adjusted to the rate of political evolution in the Borneo territories.” Selkirk also recommended that the British government should begin discussions in confidence with Tunku Abdul Rahman, Lee Kuan Yew and the Sultan of Brunei.⁹⁷

The meeting clearly indicated that the British government was now more committed to ensuring that the British-controlled territories in Southeast Asia eventually achieve a kind of broader union and was beginning to take a more pro-active role in promoting the idea. The plan was to be kept confidential until a more suitable time for its announcement. Selkirk emphasised that it was important to avoid any appearance that Her Majesty’s Government was “making the pace in this matter or seeking to impose the idea upon the peoples concerned.”⁹⁸ Selkirk’s recommendations were fully supported by the Secretary of State, who noted in his report to the Cabinet that a gradual approach was essential:

“I strongly endorse this (though of course some development outside our control might force our hand). If the plan is to be successful, it cannot be rushed. The parties to it must evolve it as their own plan.”⁹⁹

The Secretary of State felt it was not in Britain’s interest to rush the matter and that “the present situation suits us.”¹⁰⁰ Thus as of April 1960 there was a clear plan, and indeed a potential plan of action, developed by the Colonial Office aimed at working towards closer association of the British-controlled territories in Southeast Asia and the federation of Malaya. This was clear well before 10 June 1960 when Tunku Abdul Rahman first broached the idea of a federation with several of the Borneo states in a secret discussion with Lord Perth, the Minister of State for Colonies, while in London.

96. Draft Cabinet Paper for Colonial Policy Committee, April 1961, DO 169/25 (311).

97. *Ibid.*

98. Draft Cabinet Paper for Colonial Policy Committee (Prepared by Sir John Martin), April 1961, DO 169/25 (313).

99. *Ibid.*

100. *Ibid.*

A revised memorandum¹⁰¹ by Sir John Martin was discussed at a meeting of the Colonial Policy Committee on 27 July 1961

"on the long term possibility of a political association of the British Borneo territories (the Colonies of North Borneo and Sarawak, and the Protected State of Brunei) with the Federation of Malaya and the State of Singapore."¹⁰²

But the Colonial Office wanted to ensure that these efforts did not make it appear that Britain was now beginning to force the pace.¹⁰³ Lord Selkirk was quite impatient to get the scheme off the ground in order to give Lee Kuan Yew, who was under considerable pressure from the leftist parties, some encouragement.¹⁰⁴

It is during this period that the British worked on Tunku and his colleagues (particularly Tun Abdul Razak and Tun Dr Ismail Haji Abdul Rahman) to win them over to the British idea of the "Grand Design." Lee discussed the "Grand Design" with Tunku on 23 April 1961 and while the latter was still opposed to a merger, he invited Lee "to prepare a paper setting out his ideas on how the Grand Design might be achieved."¹⁰⁵ The British had also encouraged Lee to prepare a paper on the 'Grand Design,' which he produced on 9 May and it was quickly forwarded to the federation ministers.¹⁰⁶ It was circulated to Razak and other Malayan Ministers, and it was hoped it would win over the Tunku thereafter.¹⁰⁷ Lee had visited Kuala Lumpur several times to convince the Tunku of the feasibility of the "Grand Design." The British High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur noted that Lee felt Razak was already won over and he consequently relied largely on Razak to "break down Tunku's prejudice."¹⁰⁸

The role of Duncan Sandys (Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs) in this respect is quite important and the Colonial Office documents indicate that it was Sandys who managed to persuade the Tunku to reconsider his

101. This is a revised memorandum, – Colonial Policy Committee [CPC(60)17] on the 'Grand Design' – submitted to the Colonial Policy Committee for consideration by UK Ministers and is titled "Possibility of an Association of the British Borneo Territories with the Federation of Malaya and Singapore." See R. Melville to N. Pritchard, 7 April 1961, DO 169/25. Melville notes that the only point of substance on which it differed from the earlier paper was 'that it comes down definitely against an early public statement by HMG.'

102. Draft Cabinet Paper for Colonial Policy Committee (Prepared by Sir John Martin), April 1961, DO 169/25 (311).

103. Draft Cabinet Paper for Colonial Policy Committee, April 1961, DO 169/25 (311). The governors of Sarawak and North Borneo and the High Commissioner for Brunei and Lord Perth were present at the meeting.

104. Minute by R.C. Ormerod, 26 April 1961, DO 169/25.

105. Selkirk to MacLeod, 4 May 1961, CO 1030/979 (2).

106. Selkirk to MacLeod, 4 May 1961, CO 1030/979 (203).

107. Moore to Iain MacLeod of the Colonial Office, 10 May 1961, DO 169/25 (230).

108. British High Commissioner, Kuala Lumpur, to Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO), 26 May 1961, DO 169/25 (220).

objections to the idea of the greater federation, particularly in view of the political developments in Singapore. Lee told Selkirk that he felt Sandys “had brought the realities of the situation to the Tunku’s attention.”¹⁰⁹ At this stage there is a clearer crystallizing of Britain’s idea of the greater federation modelled on the “Grand Design,” developed earlier by MacDonald.¹¹⁰

In the meantime, the Tunku made an announcement in Singapore on 27 May 1961, stating his desire for closer association between the British-controlled territories in Southeast Asia and the Federation of Malaya. The political situation in Singapore had deteriorated after the PAP lost in a by-election in April 1961 and it was feared that Lee’s government may fall. The Tunku intimated to the British High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur a day before that he felt the Grand Design was a better means of insulating the federation from the political deterioration in Singapore.¹¹¹

The idea of Grand Design or Greater Malaysia took on a life of its own after Tunku Abdul Rahman’s announcement. Tunku wrote to Commonwealth Secretary Duncan Sandys on 15 June 1961 and then to the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan on 26 June 1961 giving a more detailed outline of his proposed idea of a wider federation. In the letter to Duncan Sandys he spelt out the steps that should be taken and his ideas of the federation.¹¹² The Tunku then wrote a three-page memorandum to Macmillan on 26 June explaining his idea of the new federation in hopes that it would serve as a basis for discussion. The Tunku proposed that as a first step, the Borneo territories were to be brought into the federation as units. Following this, a greater federation would be formed with Singapore. In the memorandum the Tunku noted:

It would not be out of place therefore if these territories were brought together into closer ties with the Federation of Malaya. It is proposed therefore as a first step that the territories of Brunei, Borneo and Sarawak be brought into the Federation as units of the Federation, enjoying the same rights and privileges as the States which presently form the Federation of Malaya ... After the merger of these territories with the Federation of Malaya, the next logical step would be to form a greater federation with Singapore. As the present Constitution of Singapore requires to be reviewed in 1963, the most appropriate time for preliminary discussions with Singapore would be before that date.¹¹³

Following an exchange of letters with the British Prime Minister who was supportive of the idea – which lightened Britain’s burden in Southeast

109. Selkirk to MacLeod, 4 May 1961, CO 1030/979 (2).

110. Outward Telegram from Secretary of State for Colonies to Commissioner-General for the United Kingdom in Southeast Asia, 21 April 1961 DO 169/25 (297).

111. Tory to Commonwealth Relations Office, 26 May 1961, CO 1030/979 (216).

112. Tunku to Duncan Sandys, 15 June 1961, DO 169/25 (55).

113. Tunku to Macmillan, 26 June 1961, CO 1030/980 (324). See also Tunku to Macmillan, 26 June 1961, DO 169/26 (297).

Asia – the process of formal negotiations began. It took two years before the Federation of Malaysia as visualised earlier by MacDonald came into being on 16 September 1963.

Conclusion

The idea of a wider federation between Malaya and the British territories in Southeast Asia was a subject of much discussion in the immediate post-Second World War period and various ideas emerged. The British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia Malcolm MacDonald clearly played a prominent role in the evolution of the idea in the early 1950s. He pushed for substantive high-level discussion of the idea of a “greater federation” both in Malaya and Singapore on the one hand and in the Borneo territories on the other, as well as in the Colonial Office. MacDonald felt that a wider entity encompassing Malaya, Singapore and the Borneo territories would create a stronger nation-state which could compete ably with its larger neighbours. His persistence in pushing the idea led to more substantive talks and its acceptance in the Colonial Office. Although MacDonald left Malaya in 1955 the idea was revived by the Colonial Office in the subsequent years, and in particular in 1960 serious discussions were held in the Colonial Office in response to political developments in Singapore. These developments took place before Tunku Abdul Rahman suggested the idea of a wider federation to Lord Perth in May 1960, and well before Tunku made the announcement of ‘closer association’ on 27 May 1961. While Tunku’s public announcement in 1961 had an impact on the formal negotiations on the formation of the federation of Malaysia, the path to ‘Greater Malaysia’ had already been laid well before May 1961. A convergence of interests between Britain and the Malayan and Singapore governments in 1960-61 clearly provided the catalyst for formal negotiations to take place. The formation of the federation enabled Britain to speed up the decolonisation process in Southeast Asia and at the same time enabled Malaya, Singapore and the Borneo territories to address their various political, economic and security concerns.

Note on primary records

The primary Colonial Office records related to the formation of the federation of Malaysia such as the CO 1030, CO 1022 and DO 169 are kept at The National Archives of Britain (TNA) in Kew, London.

